

Teachers who get ahead: the impact of gender, ethnicity, age and disability on teachers' careers.

SUMMARY The research reported here is part of a large study of the impact of age, disability, ethnicity and gender on the teaching profession in England. Firstly we draw on published data about the statistical profile of serving teachers. Then we go on to outline how age, gender, ethnicity and disability and their interactions relate to promotional aspirations of a sample of teachers drawn from the nine regions of England. Case study respondents saw themselves first and foremost as teachers (rather than, for instance, from a particular minority group or gender or some combination of both). A large minority of postal survey respondents from ethnic minority groups believed ethnicity to have had a negative influence on their careers. Our research data link in with other reports in this field. Some ethnic minority staff in the case study schools, whose expertise was highly valued by their headteachers, pointed out that they had experienced the oft-cited barriers to appointment.

When it came to chances of promotion, teacher informants agreed that important factors were gender and ethnicity. Nearly a quarter of postal respondents stated that they were not interested in promotion. Women and older male case study informants were quite likely to think this way for various reasons. However, further systematic study could shed light on different cultural perceptions about the importance of promotion in the diverse ethnic groups across England.

Introduction

The Department for Education and Skills is the third largest public sector employer in England and Wales (Bowers, 2000). It employs well over 400,000 teachers. Teaching is generally perceived to be an equitable career, open to all who choose to go through the prescribed stages of recruitment and training (Maclean, 1992). But how true is this statement with regard to promotion within the profession? Only a small percentage of teachers are in senior management posts (Table 1). It is now being recognised that those who choose to become teachers are far from homogenous in their make up (Maylor *et al*, 2003). Teachers are a diverse professional group, the members of which are differentiated by a number of characteristics. Some attributes, such as gender, ethnic origin and cultural background, are apparent at birth. Others, for example age, marital status and family circumstances, may change throughout a teacher's career life cycle. There can also be changes in their level of disability and health.

By 2006 a directive from the European Union requires all forms of discrimination (age, disability, ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation or belief and sexual orientation) to be illegal. In the UK the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) makes it unlawful for service providers to treat disabled people less favourably for a reason related to their disability. This paper uses the act's definition of disability, which includes both physical and mental conditions having a substantial long-term impact. Codes of practice backed by legislation now relate to race and disability and, to some extent, gender, but are voluntary in relation to age. But, is the legislation impacting on the professional lives of teachers?

To try to build up a picture about how age, gender, ethnicity and disability interact together to influence teachers' professional lives, we first look at the statistical profile of the overall teaching workforce in England. Then we present some of the main findings from our own large-scale

study of teachers' attitudes towards their careers in England in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and disability. Unless otherwise stated the statistical data presented below about the teaching population in England comes from the Department for Education and Skills (2003a).

Age

The distribution of teachers' ages is not uniform. The majority of teachers (59%) tend to be 40 or over, with less than one in five (19%) under 30. This overall picture is shown graphically in Figure 1. In every age group there are more females than males. An estimate of the median age of males is 48, whilst the comparative statistic for females is only 42. These statistics, together with others to be mentioned below, have fuelled speculation about the progressive 'ageing' and 'feminisation' of the profession (Hutchings, 2001). Naturally enough, there is a big drop-off in the proportion of female teachers in their 30s and early 40s during the child-bearing years. Figure 1 shows that both sexes are under-represented in the over 55's groups. We discuss some reasons for this below.

In 1997 when the pension rules were changed, approximately 12,000 teachers retired early. The number of teachers actually retiring early is gradually increasing again, and in 2002 it was about 4500. However, teacher retirements on the grounds of ill health are the lowest for fifteen years (Howson, 2002b). Although more women than men take ill-health retirement, once the proportion is adjusted for the higher number of women in the teaching force, proportionately more men take early retirement on health grounds.

INSERT FIGURE I

Gender

That the vast majority of teachers in England is female is indisputable. Roughly a third (31%) of full-time qualified teachers are male. Men are more likely to be found in secondary schools than primary schools. While nearly a half (46%) of secondary teachers are male, less than one fifth

(16%) of primary teachers are male. The proportion of men entering primary teaching has declined (to less than 14%) over the last decade and most teach in the upper stages of the primary school (Thornton and Bricheno, 2000; Garner, 2002).

Women are under-represented in senior positions, especially in secondary schools. Women make up approximately half the secondary teaching population and are still under-represented in secondary school senior management positions, particularly headships (Howson, 2000a). This author points out that women are well represented in London primary schools, holding 80% of 55 surveyed headships. In all sectors the proportion of women in headteacher and deputy headteacher positions has increased recently (DfES, 2003). Of all headteachers, 12,400 were women and the number of men was a little less, 10,100. The gender breakdown for the three education phases is given in Table 1 for the posts of head and deputy. In 2001 females were more likely than males to be employed in headship positions in primary schools. Taken together these facts have led to speculation that many women teachers do not often want promotion to such senior management positions, as deputy or head. We return to this point later in the discussion.

INSERT TABLE I

The majority of part-time and supply teachers are women who return to work after maternity leave (National Union of Teachers, 2001). The overall number of part-timers has steadily increased from 1985 to 2001, during which time it has doubled from 4% to 8%. Part-timers account for 9% of primary, 7% of secondary and 12% of special school teachers. Seventy-three per cent (73%) of supply staff are female, and 52% are at least 45 years old (General Teaching Council for England, 2002)

Ethnicity

The proportion of the UK population from an ethnic minority group is about 8% (National Statistics, 2002a). Ethnic minority teachers tend to be mainly located in regional areas where their heritage group is well-represented (Carrington et al, 2000). The concentration of minority ethnic teachers is highest in Inner London and lowest in the North West. Teachers of South Asian origin are more widely distributed throughout the whole country than those who described themselves as Caribbean. Ross (2001) found that this latter group of teachers were found predominantly in Inner London. Minority ethnic group teachers often utilise specialist background knowledge, which relates directly to the school community, to gain employment in areas such as religious education and bilingual support. However, these are not paths traditionally seen as leading to senior management positions and headships (Osler, 1997; Revell, 2003).

Males from minority ethnic groups tend to be working mainly in secondary schools and in shortage subjects, such as mathematics, science and information technology (Ross, 2001). Over the past few years there has been an increase in the number of young female Asian primary teachers (McCreith and Ross, 2002).

As long ago as 1993 Siraj-Blatchford indicated that where black teachers were employed they were generally on lower salaries and older than their white colleagues at the same level. The mean age for black male teachers was 36, and this was viewed as an impediment to their promotion Carrington *et al*, 2001). McCreith and Ross (2002) reported that twenty per cent (20%) of very experienced white teachers (15 years or more) recently surveyed were either head teachers or deputies, whereas the corresponding proportion was still significantly lower for black and Asian teachers. There was also little evidence that the situation is about to change dramatically for senior management positions, as the National College for School Leadership

(NCSL) reported only very small numbers of minority ethnic teachers on its courses (Revell, 2003).

Disability

Of the adult population of working age, nearly 20% report that they have some sort of long-term disability, though this may not necessarily be work-limiting (National Statistics, 2002b). The number is higher for men than women (3.7 million men, compared to 3.4 million women). The overall proportion of students with disabilities in higher education was about 5% (Tinklin *et al.* 2003). There has been little substantive research undertaken on teachers with disabilities working in mainstream schools. The General Teaching Council of England (GTCE 2002, personal communication) put the figure of teachers with disabilities much lower at 0.05%. Hence, it would seem unlikely that teaching is representative of the overall working population in terms of disability.

Research design

The Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) and Middlesex University undertook the present study between January 2002 and April 2003. It comprised a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches (detailed in Powney *et al.*, 2003), including:

- A large-scale postal survey of approximately 13,000 teachers from over a thousand schools in a third of the English Local Education Authorities and covering all nine regions of England.
- In-depth case studies of 18 schools and interviews with 109 staff covering all regions.
- Workshop discussions with interested individuals and special interest groups such as members of the NUT, the Association of Blind and Partially and Sighted Teachers (ABAPSTAS) and other professional associations.

Overall, the characteristics of teachers who responded to our postal survey were broadly similar to the profile of the whole teaching profession in England. Table II shows the comparative profiles of the survey respondents and the teaching population in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and disability. Although, teaching population estimates are far from accurate for ethnicity and disability, it is likely that the SCORE respondent sample may well slightly over-represent minority ethnic groups and those with long-term physical or mental disabilities, (Further details of informants and the statistical analysis are presented in Powney *et al*, 2003). The quantitative findings reported here were statistically significant in chi-squared tests at the 1% level.

INSERT TABLE II

Findings

Now we turn to the teachers in our study and we explore how their profile, in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and disability interacts with their promotional aspirations and achievements. It is not our intention in this paper to assess the suitability of our respondents for promotion. Our purpose is to raise some of their issues and concerns and speculate about any patterns of divergences between the represented groups. Other findings from this large-scale study are reported in Powney *et al* (2003).

Who gets ahead?

The school cases suggested that few appeared to have planned their career progression, some positively chose not to go for promotion, but all expected their job to be interesting, demanding, creative and rewarding. As one male interviewee explained:

I am in my 17th year of teaching and still love it in the classroom

(Classroom teacher, School 17)

The majority of respondents' main motivation for entering teaching, irrespective of their personal background, was that they wanted to 'make a difference'. Overall, special interest group

participants perceived a combination of factors such as age, disability, ethnicity and gender as crucial determinants of their life circumstances. Case study informants and questionnaire respondents saw themselves first and foremost as teachers (rather than, for instance, from a particular minority ethnic group or gender or some combination of both).

Gender

The majority of the SCRE survey respondents (61%) thought that gender was of little or no importance in teachers' promotion prospects, compared to 37% who thought it was of some importance or very important. Some female informants did indicate that they did not want to have to have the workload of a senior manager. One elaborated:

I considered deputy headship, but it is the hardest job in the school!

(Female primary teacher, school 2)

Both male and female teachers in one case study school perceived that males get quicker promotion than female teachers do in primary schools (School 5). Informants in another case study school believed that such expectations seem to arise early in some teachers' careers – even in training (School 13) - and some believe that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as women tend not to apply for promotion. A case study female who took promotion in the past explains the demands she felt upon her in a very emotional way as follows:

There was definitely a conflict between work and home. We were job sharing a headship and a deputy. Male colleagues thought it was funny. I would say that myself and my colleague did quite a good job. In the past [in other schools] I have heard people say, what we need for this school is a man! ...Basically I went up the ladder and back down again! All by my personal choice, a part from one break related to health. I am now biding my time while I get back into it and am still looking around...

(Primary classteacher, school 2)

Indeed heavy workload was the main reason given by nearly three-quarters of the survey respondents (74%) for considering leaving the profession. One of the case study informants, who was in a promoted position, explained how she felt about her burgeoning administration workload:

Are you less able to adapt, as you get older? I think not. I enjoy performing and the feedback [in the classroom]. The fact is though it's totally taking over my life! I'm in here at 7.30 in the morning and I don't leave until 6 pm at night! The whole thing revolves around trying to get on top of the paperwork!

(Senior management team female, School 9)

An informant in School 6 suggested that more part-time management positions should be available in schools so that teachers who were 'passionate about (their) job' but also had young and demanding families to care for could fulfil their potential. The impact of gender was elaborated further in discussions:

[I was] got at [as it was] rumoured that I only got the job because I was a man

(School 18)

...after only 7 years experience [he got the deputy post elsewhere] – but he was tall, handsome and looked the part

(School 2)

[teachers] expect to have a tall, handsome, male headteacher and would be surprised to find a small Asian female head

(Gender discussion group)

... Men expect promotion to happen.

(School 11)

Some interviewees, who were ordinary classteachers, were certainly not interested in promotion. This point was made vociferously by one case study older female:

I am the envy of everyone I know with two afternoons a week off! I am sticking to my guns! The Head keeps saying to me, wouldn't you like to go full-time? I have invested a lot of time and commitment in this school, [so I wouldn't want to leave]. It suits me down to the ground...When I see my colleagues and what they've done, I'm sure I've made the right decision for me. I have colleagues who have gone up the ladder and others who have stayed at the same level. I have never had aspirations to join the management side. That's not what I wanted to do 'cause I wanted to work with children. I have to say that I have been asked to go for senior posts but I want to enjoy my job!

(Primary Classteacher, School 13)

Some case study male teachers reported that they liked to work where there was already a male presence on the staff.

A male interviewee also explained why promotion from an ordinary class teacher was not important to him:

My other half would like to move to be closer to her mother...[but] there is little turnover in the hills [where his mother in law lives]...there will be no choice about the catchment. It will be whatever they throw at me. Nothing will hurt; I've dealt with most of the more challenging types of students and survived!

(Male secondary classteacher, School 10)

Just over a quarter (27%) of survey respondents were not interested in promotion: these were most likely to be white males (31%), then white females (25%), followed by ethnic minority group females (14%) and the group with the least number not interested in promotion were the ethnic minority males (12%).

In terms of further promotion for senior managers, an issue was age. As one female 48 year old deputy head articulated:

My daughter is in Year 8. I've got 18 months. I've got to get moved [to a headship] before she's in Year 11. After that once she has done her exams, I'll be too old. Some might say I'm too old now! It's not a very big window really.

(Deputy Head School 10)

Ethnicity

Some workshop informants believed that schools have not been especially pro-active in implementing measures that would attract staff from minority ethnic groups. Even in a successful and happy school, a member of the senior management team believed that it would not be a 'comfort zone for teachers from minority ethnic backgrounds since the overwhelming proportion of pupils and all teachers were white (School 3). Other ethnic minority staff felt more comfortable in schools where they were not identified because of their 'difference' and hence might prefer to work in schools that were culturally diverse. Some ethnic minority females wanted to work in primary schools because the staff complement was all female (e.g. School 1). Some other case study informants felt that their minority ethnic background limited their choice of school unfairly. Minority ethnic group informants elaborated their diverse perceptions as:

Ethnicity, I feel it is has been an issue...I've discussed it quite openly with the Head...I don't want to come across as only suitable to teach in these [culturally diverse] schools. My present Head is very supportive in a proactive way. I have had negative feedback in highly populated white schools. They said sorry we can't give you the post, because you haven't got the experience. I don't think this is a valid excuse! Then you find out that another NQT has got the post!

(Primary Classteacher, School 13)

How trained, how inducted, what professional development...these are not the issues. Racism is the main issue.

(Ethnic minority group workshop)

I don't know whether my ethnicity and sex have worked in my advantage because of their under-representation. I'd love to be assured that it was who I am and not what I look like... People say to me that they know they have made the right choice.

(Classteacher, School 13)

Turning to chances of promotion, the somewhat familiar theme emerges of perceived discrimination. Sixty per cent of respondents (230 out of 384) from minority ethnic groups regard ethnicity as being of some importance in promotion, and 41% (153 out of 384) believe it has had a negative influence on their careers. According to a case study ethnic minority promoted teacher, increased financial rewards would be a positive enticement into teaching for good ethnic minority graduates. He outlined his school context:

This school has over 60% ethnic minority pupils and yet has only 2 mainstream Asian teachers. ...We need to get good graduates. The routes in, and funding are important. On the financial side, the money for teaching is about £4000 less than other similar ICT jobs... There is a lot of moaning and whingeing on the part of teachers but there are a lot of problems with the long working hours, stress and bureaucracy.

(Promoted teacher, School 8)

Some evidence from the postal questionnaire responses supported his view: ethnic minority teachers were much more likely to be interested in better pay (14% versus 10% for the white population).

INSERT FIGURE 2

Gender by Ethnicity

Looking at the respondents' profiles by ethnicity and gender (see Figure 2a and b) we find that just over a third of white males had senior management or promoted posts, compared to 20% of white females. In comparison, 9% of minority ethnic males and 5% of minority ethnic females hold such positions. If we include age as a factor we find that among the younger respondents (under 45), 12% of white respondents are in promoted posts (headteacher, assistant headteacher or deputy headteacher), whereas 5% of minority ethnic teachers are promoted. Among older teachers (45 and over) 35% of white teachers are in promoted posts compared to 13% of minority ethnic teachers. Indeed, one member of a discussion group described how the process of seeking promotion could affect self-confidence:

With women and ethnic minorities always finding it difficult to gain promotion, they have low self-esteem. Then when on the job they find that they are just as good if not better than their colleagues who are being promoted, this makes them seek management positions just as anyone else who is competent at their job.

(Gender discussion group)

Feedback from the minority ethnic group of informants indicated that they feel their careers are still disadvantaged despite extensive training and qualifications, and that this can result in their being deemed 'over-qualified' and/or too experienced by potential employers, as conveyed by these quotes:

One teacher thought that she was 'usually more qualified than people on interviewing panels. The outcome is usually a rejection.'

(Minority Ethnic Group informant)

It does not matter how competent you are in all aspects of mainstream and special teaching and management/organisation/leadership skills, as a black professional, you have no chance of progressing.

(Minority ethnic discussion group)

Disability

Teachers with disabilities in special interest groups reported that they felt quite isolated especially if they have become disabled later in life. As one explained:

I attended the ABAPSTAS conference and that was the turning point. I found out that I was not alone and that all the people there had been through [isolation].

(ABAPSTAS informant)

Interviewees pointed out that being made to feel different from other staff was not always welcomed. For example, staff with disabilities reported being asked 'How will you cope?' not 'How can we help you to be a good teacher?' Thus, there was an obvious tension for some informants between being accepted as a teacher and drawing attention to their special needs and we will return to this issue later in the concluding remarks below.

Conclusion

Overall our case study and postal survey respondents saw themselves first and foremost as a teacher (rather than for instance, from a particular minority ethnic group or gender or some combination of both). Nonetheless, the general picture emerging from this study is bleak: the oft-cited lack of understanding and support for diversity in school communities still prevails. It has to be said, however, that the case study schools were generally the exception to this rule. From the present evidence, one can speculate that there maybe opportunities for individuals to take out test cases once the EU directive, which outlaws discrimination in 2006 comes into force (NUT, 2001 personal communication). What could be argued to be important for the welfare of school communities is whether individual teachers perceive their situation to be fair? It is clear from our study that ethnic minority staff are more likely to perceive themselves as being held back unfairly in career terms.

Our finding that some teachers may prefer to work with others of the same sex is not entirely novel and confirms other reported data. Male primary teachers have previously been reported to

prefer to work with other male teachers (Thornton and Bricheno, 2000); and to a limited extent the same phenomenon has been suggested for ethnic minority females (McCreith and Ross, 2002).

Some of the problematic issues surrounding disabilities reported by our respondents may not be due to discriminative practices but, be partly explained by the fact that teaching as an occupation is exempt from some conditions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The whole question of teachers' perceptions and knowledge about these exemptions needs further clarification for a diverse range of disabilities (NUT, 2001).

The above questions are worthy of further study because the diversity in the teaching profession is likely to continue to increase. This speculation is based on the reported statistical trends, in terms of ethnicity and to some extent disability, although diversity is posited to decrease overall in terms of gender (Thornton and Bricheno, 2000). There is some cause for optimism as, although the recruitment of males to secondary teacher training has slumped, the number of males applying for primary teacher training is on the increase (Garner, 2002). Also, Wilson *et al* (2003) reports a higher proportion of ethnic minority trainees on a government-sponsored work experience placement scheme to encourage undergraduates into teaching.

We now turn to the question of who gets ahead in terms of promotion? Is it the case that the career aspirations of all the diverse groups are the same? In particular, might female staff from different groups have different aspirations? Given the massive scale of the teaching workforce in England, some may well be happy enough to be the foot soldiers. Indeed some case study teachers made this point exactly. Ordinary classteachers receive more than above the country's average wage. Naturally, factors such as having a young family influence promotional aspirations. Other influences could also include cultural, geographic, demographic and regional issues, such as living in inner city London, where the proportion of ethnic minority groups is

highest. Earley *et al* (2004) found some gender differences for the type of school aspiring heads would like to manage: more women wanted a challenging school, which is likely to be in the inner city. Moreover, the maintenance of an appropriate work-life balance is very important for some women who might be willing to take promotion only if they could have more flexible work arrangements (NUT, 2001). Whether this is generally the case or not for most ethnic minority group women needs further investigation. Perhaps we need to turn around the question, '*Who gets ahead?*' and instead ask teachers why they might choose *not* to go for promotion? One could speculate that the diverse ethnic groups may have different perceptions about careers. Our research found that some case teachers definitely did not have promotional aspirations (and were proud of it!). In our case study sample, promotion was *not* generally perceived to happen by chance as other authors have mooted (Fraser *et al*, 1998). Some of our main grade class teacher informants were positively *not* interested in it.

This study concurs with the prevailing research evidence that the increased workload may well be a deterrent to taking on senior management positions (MORI, 2001). However, whether it is more or less of a deterrent for some ethnic minority groups is still an open question. The answer may not be simple because it depends on the specific interaction between the cultural heritage of individual teachers and their local school community. But the reported differences among survey respondent groups in their perceptions of their career prospects need further investigation. In terms of ethnic minorities gaining management positions there is no evidence that the situation is about to improve dramatically as few are involved in senior management training initiatives by the government (Revell, 2003). A NUT (2004) survey of Black and Minority Ethnic teachers in senior management positions also reinforces findings that ethnic minority group teachers feel they have to push themselves extra hard to prove that they are equal to other staff.

Pollard (2003) has argued that teachers need to become activists so as to empower themselves in the teaching profession in the 21st century. Indeed one can speculate about whether or not he is really alluding to the necessity for an overt power struggle by diverse groups to gain equal respect, whether in senior management or main grade teaching positions. To conclude with an apt point from Morrison (2003) a black American female activist:

The political awareness debate is about the power to define...The definers want the power to name, and the defined are now taking that power away from them...

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Table I: Numbers of headteachers and deputies in the teaching population in England in each education phase by gender (DfES, 2003a)

Phase and post	Numbers of teachers (%)		
	Female	Male	Total
Primary and Nursery			
Head	10,600 (61%)	6,900 (39%)	17,500 (100%)
Deputy	11,600 (75%)	3,900 (25%)	15,500 (100%)
Secondary			
Head	1,200 (31%)	2,600 (69%)	3,800 (100%)
Deputy	4,300 (38%)	7,000 (62%)	11,300 (100%)
Special (and pupil referral units)			
Head	500 (47%)	600 (53%)	1,200 (100%)
Deputy	800 (60%)	600 (40%)	1,400 (100%)

Table II: Comparisons of the characteristics of the postal survey respondents with the whole of the teaching population in England (DfES, 2003a,b) in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and disability

Characteristics (Number of respondents)		Survey	Teaching population
Gender (n=2158)	Female	70%	69%
	Male	30%	31%
Age (n=2158)	Under 30	18%	19%
	30 to 39	22%	22%
	40 to 49	32%	33%
	50 and over	27%	26%
	Not specified	1%	–
Ethnic heritage (n=2135)	Asian or Asian British	7%	2%
	Black or black British	3%	2%
	White or white British	87%	74%
	Other and Mixed and Chinese	2%	1%
	Not specified	1%	22%
Disability (n=2158)	Yes	5%	0.05
	None declared	84%	–
	Missing	1%	-

Figure 1: Percentage of full-time teachers in the teaching population in England (DfES, 2003a)

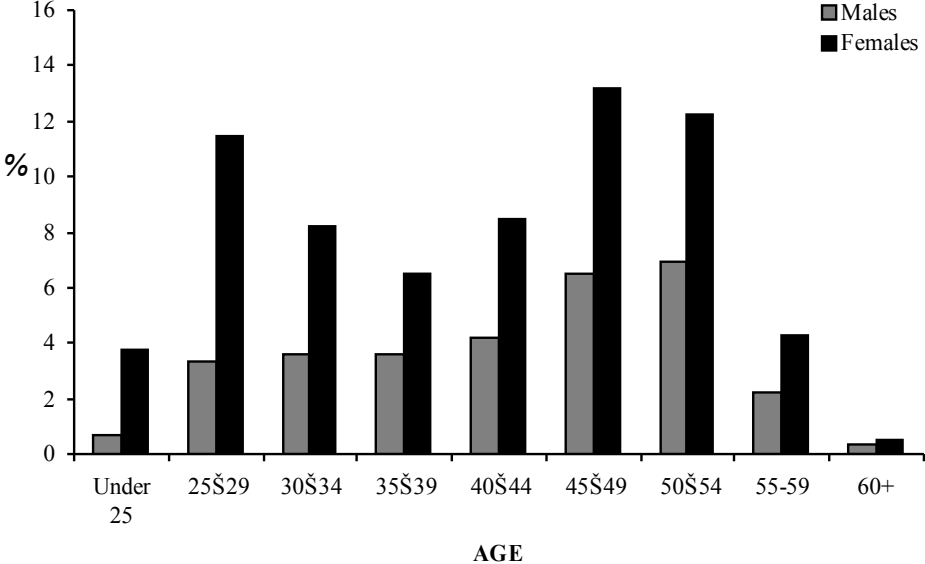


Figure 2: Percentage of postal survey respondents by gender and ethnicity a) senior management and b) classroom teachers

a)



b)

